



A herd of young California sea lions plays "cat and mouse" with the kayak off the Farallon Islands. Note the video camera mounted on the front of the kayak.

Kayaking the Farallones

*Story and Photos
By Michael Powers*

My little wildwater kayak seemed to tremble with excitement beneath me as I entered the surf zone, and with good reason. For 20 years I had waited for this opportunity. Now, at last, I was kayaking among the Farallon Islands, 25 miles off the coast of Northern California.

I was approaching the wildly convoluted shoreline of Southeast Farallon, at 211 acres the largest of these islands. Intrigued by a glint of golden beach, I left the safety of the open water and paddled into a tiny cove. I was just a few yards offshore when paradise erupted into pandemonium.

Without warning, a Stellar sea lion bull, whose great bulk had until that moment blended invisibly with a maze of tidal pools, exploded into motion. Its appearance was startlingly like that

of an aroused grizzly bear, as all 2,000 pounds of tawny bulk rippled beneath the effort of its charge. It moved with amazing speed straight toward the water, or me, I wasn't quite certain which.

There was certainly no mistaking the expression of territorial indignation on its face, as it imploded into the surf scarcely a paddle length beyond the nose of my kayak. I did the only sensible thing, and quickly retreated out of his cove. This was my welcome to the Farallon Islands!

My mind flashed back to the first time I had sighted the Farallones, nearly 20 years ago. That morning I had been climbing Mount Tamalpais, the gentle giant that rises into the sky just north of San Francisco's Golden Gate. Up through the mists that shrouded the mountain's green slopes I had come, surrounded by the drama

of a clearing storm. When I broke through the clouds near the summit, my reward was an unforgettable spectacle.

Like Jack on the mythical Beanstalk, I had emerged into a world hidden from view below. Beneath me lay a carpet of soft, white clouds, sweeping eastward all the way to the distant Sierra Nevada. To the west shimmered a dazzling expanse of sun burnished sea, and out there, suspended in silhouette on the western horizon, lay the Farallones. Their rugged profile appeared to float in space, detached from the earth, unreachable.

For two decades after that, the Farallones remained remote and inaccessible to me, but tantalizing stories persisted in drifting back to the California mainland from there — fishermen and sailors spoke in reverent tones when describing this ecological phenomenon. They evoked images of stark, haunting beauty, teeming wildlife and dangerous waters.

Because of the great pinniped population, the Farallones were known to be a feeding ground for great white sharks. And there were ominous reports of terrible storms, unexplainable shipwrecks and drownings.

Then one day my phone sounded with a ring of destiny. On the line was fellow kayaker Tom Monaghan, a true man of the sea, an abalone diver by trade. For years I had exhorted Monaghan to take me along on one of his diving expeditions out to the Farallones. Now he was telling me that if I wanted to go to the Islands, to be on the docks the next morning before dawn.

I hardly slept that night. While it was still dark, I made my way down to old Princeton Harbor, a protected anchorage a few miles south of San Francisco. The night sky glowed softly from the lights of the little coastal town of Half Moon Bay, where most sensible folks were still in bed. But here on the docks the ghostly forms of divers, fishermen and seafood dealers scurried around in the pre-dawn gloom, communicating in low whispers, and everything seemed charged with a sense of urgency.

For the moment, the weather was clear and holding. But the sea is a changeable being, and waits for no



Abalone diver Tom Monaghan takes to the kayak for a close-up look at the rocky shoreline.

one.

I found Tom and his crew already hard at work, and was careful to keep out of the way as they accomplished the last minute checks of fuel and water and diving gear. Then the twin diesel engines of our 32-foot dive boat sputtered and rumbled to life. Soon, we were moving out across a glassy, gently rolling sea.

Accompanying Tom were two other commercial divers — powerfully built, quiet men, with features roughened by years of exposure to water and wind. They eyed my cameras and kayak with good-natured consternation. This was serious business for the divers, who must make their living in the brief times when weather and sea conditions allow them access to the remote reefs and islands where abalone still exist in commercial quantities. I knew it was a break in protocol for Tom to allow me and my kayak along on a “business trip” out to the Islands. But Monaghan was also a crack kayaker, and therefore more sympathetic of my long held

desire to paddle the Farallones than most commercial divers would have been.

It was a beautiful spring day — sky like crystal and nary a wisp of wind. For miles we rolled and pitched along with the rhythm of the sea, maintaining a course nearly due magnetic west, while the California mainland melted away behind us.

Then a groan from the skipper alerted the rest of us that something was wrong. Following his gaze ahead, we beheld the sailor’s curse: a wall of fog blanketing the horizon from north to south. Soon we slipped from sunny skies into gray nothingness, and I could sense the divers immediately grow tense. By now, almost three hours had passed since we had left the mainland, and we should have been approaching our objective. The radar was switched on. For a few agonizing minutes, only small points of light that indicated other fishing boats in the area appeared on the radar’s monitor.

Ultimately, it was the direction the

flying birds were taking that these sea men trusted, and we corrected our course to follow them. Soon, to everyone's great relief, a more substantial image appeared on the glowing green radar screen, dead ahead. Then the rugged profile of Southeast Farallon Island suddenly loomed out of the fog, right off our bow!

Monaghan cut the throttles back and we crept closer. The crew's experienced eyes scrutinized the rocky shoreline for indications of current and swell conditions, factors that were crucially important to the divers. The swells that morning, though only a

for diving, I gazed around with open-mouthed amazement.

The rocky shoreline, a bizarre labyrinth of tidal pools, crevasses, caves and grottoes, appeared utterly devoid of vegetation. Yet evidence of wildlife was everywhere. Our arrival was greeted by staring eyes and a great chorus of squawks, grunts, splashes and roars. Overhead, birds of many species — gulls and horned puffins, murres and swift Brandt's cormorants, Cassin's auklets and ash storm petrels — swooped and hovered. Pinnipeds of all sizes and shapes lounged in every available tidal pool and niche in the rocks. I felt like

plummeted into the sea.

Now it was my turn to be galvanized into action. I untethered my faithful kayak from its place on the deck, and began attaching a special waterproof video camera to a mount just forward of the cockpit. Soon I was securely skirted into my kayak. The diver's platform hanging out the back of the boat provided a perfect place from which to launch, and I slipped gracefully into the blue waters of Maintop Bay.

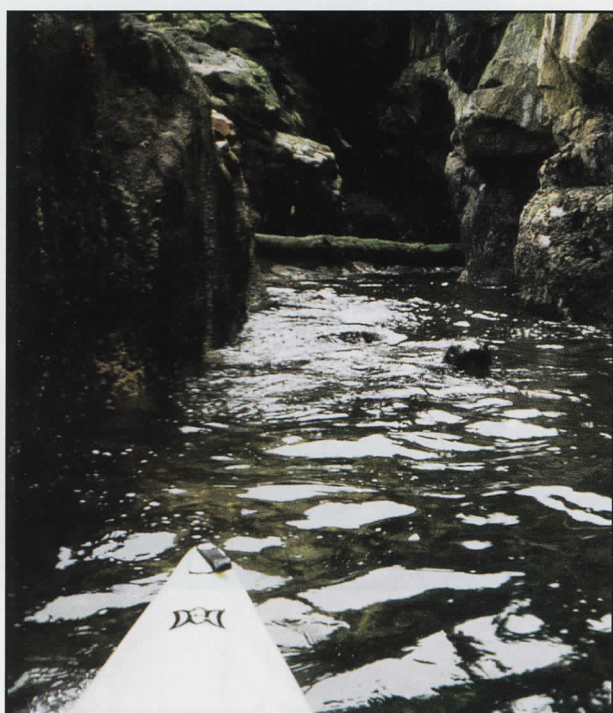
The encounter with the territorial sea lion bull, only minutes after I had set out alone in my kayak, had left me somewhat unnerved. As I continued my explorations, I could not refrain from glancing frequently back over my shoulders. As the distance between myself and the mother ship grew ever greater, I began to suffer from an overwhelming feeling of ... aloneness.

I realized that along this rugged shoreline, I would soon be — for all practical purposes — totally out of contact with my companions. The dive boat couldn't respond if I got into trouble anyway, tethered as it was to the two men below. In this state of consciousness, every splash of my paddle or unexplained sound from behind registered as evidence of a great white's rushing attack.

I could feel the sweat building up under my paddle jacket. It was with considerable effort that I disciplined myself back into a state of watchful calmness.

Gradually, entrancement with this pristine and exotic wonderland began to displace my anxiety. There were numerous fissures worn by millenniums of storms and erosion through the granodiorite rock that allowed the sea access deep into the interior of the island. Yet, the swell and tidal surges along this irregular, exposed shore were highly unpredictable, and the probability of breaking surf at any moment kept me constantly on edge.

The small whitewater kayak I was paddling, fabricated of practically indestructible space-age plastic, was the ideal craft for maneuvering in the tight-quartered complexity of this environment. Its short length and highly rockered hull gave it the ability to be spun around quickly to face an oncoming wave. A longer and sleeker sea kayak, much swifter in open water, would have been hope-



The author encounters an elephant seal cow in a narrow, shoreline channel.

moderate 3-4 feet in size, were rolling in energetically from the south, making that side of the island too rough and dangerous for diving. We circled around to the northwest and entered a large, protected anchorage which the chart identified as Maintop Bay. On cue, the sun broke through the fog and we found ourselves in paradise.

Tom moved the boat in toward shore, to a position still well outside the breaking surf, and far enough out so as not to disturb the many nesting birds, and anchored in about five fathoms of water. While the crew busied themselves with preparations

Charles Darwin, leaning over the railing of the HMS Beagle back in 1835, beholding the Galapagos for the first time.

I was jolted back to the 20th century by the discordant sound of the boat's air compressor beginning to chug away. Two large coils of rubber air hose were carefully positioned on the deck near the stern. The divers struggled to pull on their thick wet-suits. Then, wearing great amounts of weight around their waists and hooked up to the air hoses, armed with their abalone irons and game bags, they lumbered onto the diving platform at the stern of the boat and

lessly clumsy in these labyrinths. Yet at times I found myself in a rocky channel too narrow for even my little craft to negotiate, and then was challenged to back out, all the while contending with the powerful ebb and flow of the sea.

I grew to appreciate the ingenuity of the original coastal peoples, who over many centuries of trial and error, had evolved the techniques, as well as the design, of the hunting crafts that were the predecessors of my modern day kayak.

The mysterious beauty of the sea-sculptured shoreline was irresistible. Each rocky prominence concealed another exquisite microcosm of geology and wildlife. The hours passed away unnoticed, as I slipped silently from cove to cove, exploring and photographing, reliving the ancient rituals of the hunter-gatherers.

Then I noticed I was approaching the far western extremities of Maintop Bay, and the seas were growing rougher.

I spotted a sandy beach leading up to what appeared to be a good-sized cave, set well above the high tide line. As I paddled nearer, my arrival was duly announced by a noisy chorus of adolescent California sea lions lounging on the beach. This immediately precipitated a profound reaction, as great numbers of their kin began pouring out of the nearby cave entrance.

There must have been a major rookery inside, for while I stared in disbelief, astounding numbers of females and their pups continued to disgorge from the cave and go tumbling down the beach to the sea. Once in the water, they seemed to lose all fear of me.

Like the new kid on the block, having been repeatedly chased away by the big guys, I would now try to integrate myself with the small fry. The young sea lions seemed to sense my loneliness. They formed into packs and began to move in graceful, synchronous maneuvers around my kayak.

Their instinctive reaction was to approach me from behind, where they would display a brazenness that was sometimes quite unnerving. Time after time, I would spin around and attempt to film these swift rogues as they charged my rear flanks, only to have them dive in unison when

they saw they were discovered. The pups seemed to take great delight in this game of cat and mouse, in which I was definitely the mouse.

At last they seemed to grow bored with our little game, and moved off into deeper water. I, too, was growing tired. In spite of the non-stop thrills of exploring this amazing environment, the stress of paddling alone in such potentially dangerous conditions was beginning to take its toll. I could feel my timing and concentration begin to fall off.

In my preoccupation with the sea lions, I failed to notice a large cresting wave charging in from outside. By

the time the sound of breaking water alerted me, it was too late. I spun around just in time to see a six-foot-high wall of green water towering over me, and all I could do was to thrust my paddle out in a defensive low brace and gulp a lungful of air in anticipation of the wave's impact.

The mind sometimes does strange things at moments of great stress. I sensed my kayak being hurtled violently, end over end toward the rocks. Yet it felt almost dream-like and in slow motion, with no noticeable sound, very abstract. At last I felt myself being deposited with surprising gentleness, into a shallow tidal pool.

An amazing array of wildlife decorates the shoreline of the Farrallon Islands.





Fortunately for my cameras (and my head!), I landed right side up. Immediately I checked the video camera to see if it was still functioning, probably a hysterical reaction.

It was then I realized that to remain out any longer would be pushing my luck, which up until then had been extraordinary. I worked my way off the rocks and sprinted for the final time back to the safety of deep water.

I found the abalone boat anchored at the far side of Maintop Bay. It had changed locations during my long absence. When at last I drew near, I could make out Monaghan on the deck, sweating from the exertion of

tending the diver's lifelines.

"Yahoo, Tom!" My own voice sounded strange to me. He glanced up, and I thought I detected a look of envy flash across his face that said he would have loved to be out there with a paddle in his hands and a good kayak under him. But this was a day of work for Tom.

For the remainder of the hours we spent in Maintop Bay, I was content to remain on board the dive boat, surrounded by the sights and smells of man and machinery, and the incessant chug-a-chug of the air compressor. I busied myself recording the rituals of these modern day sea

hunters at work.

Periodically, a diver would burst to the surface like some alien sea monster, heavily laden with prey. The deck of the launch was rapidly becoming buried under a mountain of abalone. There is no legal limit on the number of mollusks that commercial divers may gather here. However, the divers are required by law to carry a gauge below and measure each abalone shell to be certain it reaches the minimum commercial size of eight inches before disturbing it. These laws are strictly enforced; I noticed Tom rechecking the size of each abalone as he pulled it from the



Divers unload their heavy abalone bags before returning to the waters off the Farallones.

diver's bags.

The divers' stamina amazed me. Each time they surfaced, they would remain aboard just long enough to empty their bulging abalone bags. Then, scarcely pausing to rest, they would splash back into the sea again. Even though the water was clear, they immediately disappeared in the shadows of the thick kelp forest that rose from the bottom. Only bubbles rising to the surface revealed the location of air-breathing beings below.

By now, the sun had fallen ominously low in the western sky. Visibility was getting worse in the kelp forest below. The divers came clambering onboard for the final time, exhausted by their tremendous labors. Almost six hours underwater! But across the deck of our boat were piled 170 abalone, which would command \$13 apiece back on the Princeton docks.

We weighed anchor and slipped away from Maintop Bay. Tom carefully negotiated the rock-strewn north end of the island, passing by Sugarloaf, the rugged prominence that had served as a landmark for early Spanish navigators and the

Russian fur sealers before them. I thought about those first explorers who had discovered an untouched paradise here.

Sir Francis Drake wrote in his *The World Encompassed* that these islands replenished his ship's larders with a "plentiful and great store of seals and birds." Then the Russians arrived with their Aleut slaves in the early 1800s to desecrate the sea otters and the pinniped population. The sea otters never recovered, the seals obviously did.

During the California gold rush, enterprising entrepreneurs discovered the seemingly limitless sea bird egg supply, free for the gathering at the Farallones. Those eggs would fetch a dollar apiece back in protein-starved San Francisco. Fourteen million were taken before the carnage ended.

Fortunately the Farallones have been protected since 1907, first as a National Wildlife Refuge and a National Marine Sanctuary, then as a California State Bird Refuge, and finally designation by the State Water Resources Control Board as an "Area of Special Biological Significance."

All this insures these rocks remain

hallowed ground where none may tread, except for a few privileged marine biologists, and even they must go very lightly. By last count, there are over 300,000 birds of 12 species thriving among the Farallon Islands, making it the most populous bird rookery in the country south of Alaska.

By now we had reached deep water, and Tom set a course east toward the California mainland and eased the throttles forward. The magnificent, mysterious Farallones receded from view, silhouetted by the setting sun. Then the sun sank beyond the horizon, all that remained visible behind was the wake from our powerful twin engines, and a glorious, twilight sky.

For a long time, I sat quietly at the stern, lost in thought. I felt stirred by deep feelings, after the hours in my kayak, so intimately connected to the sea and the island.

I realized that coming here, to this untamed, lonely place, had changed me somehow. A part of me would remain forever out there, among the wild, free beings of the Farallones.

Warning: The California Department of Fish and Game is sufficiently concerned about the potential for "white shark-diver interaction" at the Farallones, that they prohibit their divers from conducting official DFG diving operations there. Commercial divers who work there do so at considerable risk. The white shark factor, the remote location of these islands, and the unpredictable and sometimes violent weather, combine to make sport diving and kayaking in the vicinity of the Farallon Islands extremely dangerous and not recommended. 🐋

Michael Powers, a professional writer/photographer specializing in kayaking and outdoor adventure, has worked and lived by the sea at Half Moon Bay, California for the past 20 years. Powers is a lieutenant commander in the Tsunami Rangers, an "extreme condition" kayaking group based on the Northern California coast. Watch for their film, "Adventures of the Tsunami Rangers," to appear on public television. Michael Powers is currently at work on a book on the subject of Adventure Photography.